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Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

THOREAU MACDONALD: ARTIST AND ILLUSTRATOR

July - August 1973

The work of Thoreau MacDonald covers the whole range of the graphic arts, from oil paintings to line drawings to calligraphy. This exhibition attempts to display a sampling of his work as it relates to book design and illustration. The underlying theme of almost all his illustrations is rural Ontario, an evocation of the past when the small family farm, its existence governed by the natural rhythms of the seasons, was the way of life for a large number of the people of this country. The wild animals that appear so often, both on their own and as parts of a landscape, are invested by the artist with a meaning that only comes from profound understanding and a basic sympathy with their wild state. In an introductory note to Birds and Animals Thoreau MacDonald says: "Its a thrill to see any wild animal tending his affairs in his home environment. These drawings are a kind of record of meetings with animals. They are not the work of a naturalist, nor an artist, just a fond observer".

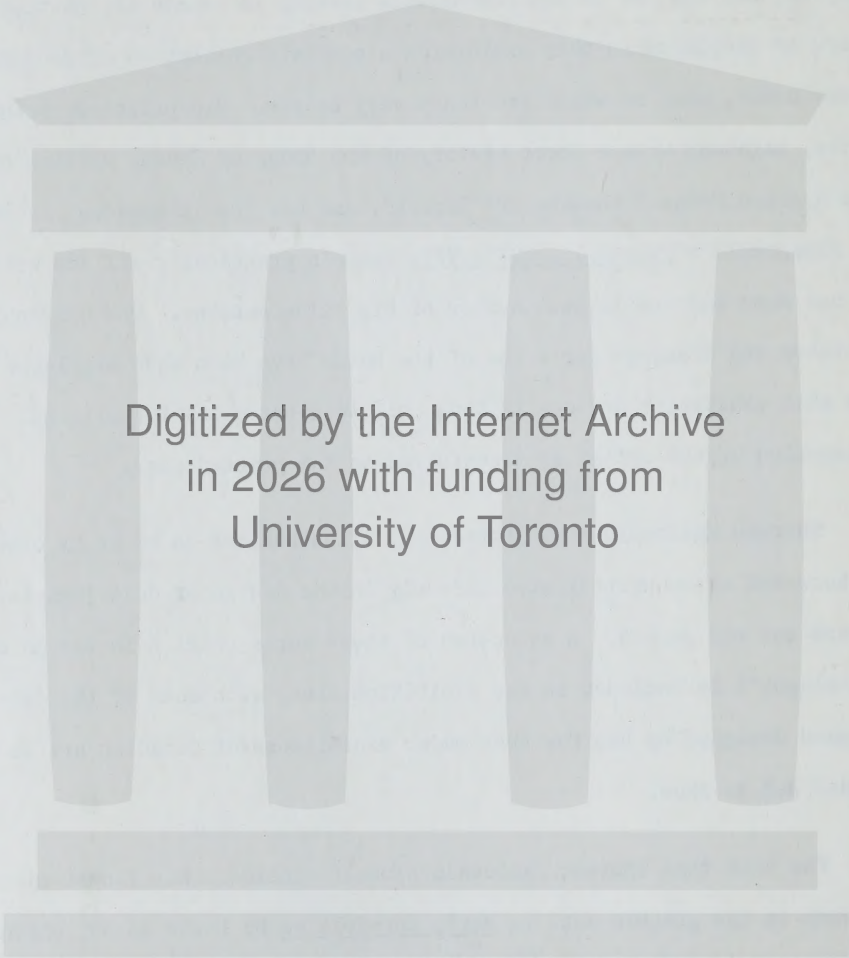
This exhibition is based on Margaret E. Edison's Thoreau MacDonald; A Catalogue of Design and Illustration (University of Toronto Press, 1973), a pictorial and bibliographical record of the whole range of Thoreau MacDonald's work. It is the first bibliographical catalogue of the work of any Canadian artist. Many of the items displayed in this exhibition are on loan from the Edison collection and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library gratefully acknowledges the generosity and cooperation of Marnie Edison.

The Woodchuck Press was established by MacDonald in the 1930's as a

means of distributing the work he liked best in the form which suited it best. It constituted a genuine participation in the private press movement where author, designer, artist and printer all came together, and, as such was one of the few private presses in Canada at the time. There is displayed in this exhibition a complete collection of Woodchuck Press books, many of which are today very scarce. His privately printed books, together with a short history of the Group of Seven, written for the Ryerson Press "Canadian Art Series", and his "Reminiscences" in Doris M. Fitzgerald's Thornhill, 1793-1963, contain practically all the writing he has done and the largest number of his illustrations. The original sketches and drawings for a few of the books have been made available for this exhibition and one is thus able to discern how the original conception of the artist is transferred to the printed page.

Thoreau MacDonald contributed many illustrations to books by other authors and often participated directly in the design of dust jackets, covers and end papers. A selection of these works (Part B in the Edison "Catalogue") is included in the exhibition along with some of the catalogues designed by him for such major exhibitions of Canadian art as the annual C.N.E. show.

The book that Thoreau MacDonald himself considers his finest piece of work in the graphic arts is Maria Chapdelaine by Louis Hémon, which he illustrated in 1938. His comments on the book reveal his attitude towards literary work which impressed him and called forth his finest efforts: "When illustrating a book so fine as this the designer had better merely accompany the text as harmoniously and unobtrusively as he can and not



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interrupt the author and reader with his conceptions." He also illustrated books of poems written by his father, J.E.H. MacDonald, which were published by the Woodchuck Press and the Ryerson Press.

Two unique books which display design work by Thoreau MacDonald are exhibited. As the Camera Catches C.L.B., a special presentation volume to Charles Luther Burton, President of the Robert Simpson Company, designed by MacDonald, has been kindly loaned for the exhibition by Mr. Allan Burton and the Robert Simpson Company. A copy of Albert H. Robson's Canadian Landscape Painters, specially bound for display at the Golden Gate International Exposition of 1939, has been loaned by the McGraw-Hill Ryerson Company. The design for the binding is by Thoreau MacDonald.

A few illustrations from periodicals, particularly those from The Candian Forum, have been shown. For a number of years Thoreau MacDonald was the artistic director of the Forum and a great number of his drawings became well known as Forum covers.

The bookplate designs of Thoreau MacDonald exhibit his customary care and craftsmanship and in this most personal of the ephemeral arts his sure touch is discernible.

This exhibition salutes an artist whose unique contribution to Canadian culture is being recognized. Barker Fairley said, in an introductory letter to the Edison Catalogue, "What all artists dream of is that their work should finally hang together, that it should carry its own signature without having to be signed. And of whom can we say this more confidently than of you, whose handwriting is present in every line you draw?"

Richard Landon